

A National Treasure: Some Thoughts on the Accomplishments of Irene Elizabeth Aubrey

• Sheila Egoff •



Irene Aubrey

Résumé: L'auteur rappelle les grandes étapes de la carrière d'Irène Aubrey à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada et souligne le rôle essentiel qu'a joué celle-ci, tant au Canada anglais qu'au Canada français, dans la reconnaissance de la littérature de la jeunesse comme domaine de recherche et pratique culturelle légitimes.

Summary: The author recalls the career of Irene Aubrey at the National Library of Canada, underlining the importance of her role there in establishing the scholarly and cultural importance and legitimacy of children's literature in both English and French Canada.

When the word went forth in 1975 that the National Library of Canada was finally prepared to appoint a specialist in children's literature to its staff, no one in the world of Canadian children's literature was surprised to learn that the appointment had gone to Irene Aubrey. It was as if Irene had been (albeit unconsciously) waiting in the wings for the call to be Canada's first (and hopefully not the last) National Children's Librarian. Although this title was never official, it is how I and many of us across the country think of her.

Irene is a living example of Leo Tolstoy's philosophy of history. History,

he sought to show, is not the result of what great historical personages intend, but is the result of the everyday lives of the many; and it is the latter, who surrender themselves to the flow of history, who probably understand its course the best. Irene Aubrey, in her field, was such an understanding person.

It is amazing to note how her whole career has seemed pointed toward one end. First of all, she was born in Ottawa (the chief bilingual city in Canada even before the Official Languages Act). She had a completely bilingual upbringing as the daughter of a French-speaking father and an Irish mother. Speaking two languages was somewhat disturbing to her as a child but when Irene expressed



The Hachette Publishing Company, Paris, France, 1960-1961.

her bewilderment to her mother she was comforted with the words: "It will all come together one day." And indeed it has. Even in her name, Irène in French and Irene (Ireen) in English she belongs equally to both cultures.

Her undergraduate and post-graduate education and her professional career appear now as if laid out by a curriculum advisor. This consisted of a BA from the University of Ottawa (more French than English), a stint at a business college in Ottawa and then a BLS from the Library School of the University of Toronto (certainly more English than French). Her first job in librarianship was as a children's librarian at the Ottawa Public Library (completely bilingual). For a change of scene, but still on course, she was off to Paris for a year (it turned out to be two) to learn and study the French publishing scene with the famous French publisher, Hachette. This was certainly a prescient move. Who would have realized in the early 1960s that the publishing scene in Canada was to burgeon so suddenly and dramatically with an influx of government money? A knowledge

of publishing trends in Canada became almost as important as a knowledge of the books themselves, especially for a person in an advisory capacity. With her background our "national librarian" became proficient in all aspects of the book world as they impinged upon children's literature.

It is interesting to speculate whether the time in Paris contributed to or induced the *sang-froid* that is such a notable part of her character (although as the eldest daughter in a family of seven with three older brothers she may have long learned to be calm, cool, collected and composed). However, she tells the story that in Paris she boarded, along with other young women, in the home of a viscountess, complete with maid and butler service. One day at lunch, in struggling with an unsectioned grapefruit, she shot the juice into the eye of the viscountess. While Irene sat as if turned to stone, the viscountess continued to raise her wineglass to her lips and remarked calmly: "Once will be enough, Irene."

After her immersion in the technicalities and techniques of book publishing, it was back to Ottawa as head of a branch at the Ottawa Public Library. Then came two important positions in children's librarianship in Quebec, first as Children's Services Librarian at the West Island Regional Library Service and then as Head of the Children's Section at the Westmount Public Library in Montreal. All of which brings us to the momentous year 1975.

The employment of a consultant at the National Library to advise on children's literature was first proposed in 1969 by Elinor Kelly, then Chairperson of the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians, a national organization that preceded the founding of the Canadian Library Association. The Association and the then Association canadienne des bibliothécaires de langue française (and their associated members) campaigned long and hard for a position first designated in a brief to the Secretary of State as Children's Literature Librarian/Consultant. That six years passed before the accomplishment of the goal probably does not mean that the "powers that be" actually opposed the appointment. I well remember a conversation I had with the first National Librarian Kaye Lamb (after he had retired). He told me that he had heard of the CLA/ACBLF brief and was genuinely puzzled by it. In essence, his question was: What do children's books have to do with the essential and scholarly work of the National Library? A simple answer, of course, is that children's books come under the same laws of legal deposit and copyright as any other. Another is that there is obviously an audience for them, and they, like adult books, contribute to the intellectual and imaginative development of the reader. Moreover, children's authors and illustrators are also an undeniable segment of a country's structured economy. Something has to be done to make them more than inert examples of a past once they enter the National Library's Collections. The brief quite rightly emphasized that the person holding the position would provide professional services to librarians, publishers, government officials, and agencies, specialists and the general public using the resources of the National Library.

The theory of reference work as propounded by Dr. Samuel Rothstein (well-known for his writings on the subject) is that supply causes demand. How do you know that you need a microwave oven when it has not yet been invented? By 1979 the success of the new division at the National Library was so apparent

that it was renamed the Children's Literature Service/Service de littérature de jeunesse and had three permanent staff members. Its mandate included resource building, advisory, bibliographic and reference services, and promotion. And Irene was its Chief.

Irene's first task, which took several years to accomplish, was to identify, and then retrieve, all the children's books owned by the Library so that they constituted a visible special collection. This in turn led to purchases beyond the legal deposit regulations: early and rare Canadiana and books with Canadian content but not published in this country. From something haphazard, hidden like a few special trees amid a vast forest, the children's collection has become a cohesive national resource. It is housed in one room and part of the stacks of one of the basements of the National Library and although the ambiance is a bit dreary, it is worth a trip to Ottawa simply to gaze upon our collective heritage of children's books that range from what may be the earliest published to the latest under Legal Deposit or to those recently purchased. As an aside here, and as a reflection on Irene's assiduity as a collector, I recall listing in the earliest edition of *Notable Canadian Children's Books* a title that could have been at least one of our earliest books for children held in the then separate Public Archives. Not only did Irene pry the book from the Archives (I suspect by cajolement rather than fiat), but had the courtesy to phone me, not to boast, but to thank me. This combination of action and *la politesse* is an innate part of her nature and one of the secrets of her success.

Any collection of original works needs backup materials for additional research. Questions have to be answered. *Who* was R.M. Ballantyne, who wrote so enthusiastically about boy life in the Canadian North in 1856? *When* was Elizabeth Cleaver on the Honours List of the Hans Christian Andersen Award? Over the years Irene carefully built up a reference collection, the books not only chosen for historical principles, but reflecting developments in children's literature. It is international in scope as befits our multicultural society and the rising international recognition of our books for children and young adults. It was rightly conceived as a separate collection both for easy access for research and to promote serendipity, which really only works when like stands with like. It is rather perplexing to learn that these books are now amalgamated with the music and rare books collections. Whatever happened to classification?

Irene also initiated the acquisition, by gift or purchase, of original manuscripts of Canadian children's books, and particularly of original illustrations by Canada's ever-growing and internationally recognized body of illustrators. While her book judgment is impeccable, she also has a flair for art and illustration, probably enhanced by time spent in the museums and art galleries of Paris and elsewhere. Combining her love of illustration and her knowledge of children, she once wrote: "To be a good illustrator, it is not enough to have talent. An illustrator needs to know the child's world, to be in sympathy with it, and talk directly to it. We create from what we feel inside ourselves. Talent and feeling go hand in hand." She was a personal friend of Elizabeth Cleaver, one of the early wave of illustrators of the late 1960s who made our picture books known internationally. Irene translated Cleaver's *The Miraculous Hind*¹ into French and for ten years, until 1996, she was the Administrator and the Chairperson of the Committee for the

Elizabeth Mrazik-Cleaver Canadian Picture Book Award /Prix Elizabeth Mrazik-Cleaver pour le meilleur livre d'images canadien.

Most of us in Canada who have been professionally concerned with children and their books have served at one time or another as speakers, jurors, consultants and general advisors to this and that, and have done it very happily and often at considerable expense to ourselves. However, judging by the correspondence that is piled on my desk at this moment, Irene's contributions to the speaking circuits, panels and juries on children's books and other assorted professional duties have been extraordinary. Irene was an international star. Her language abilities, her position at the National Library, her knowledge and calm, innate assurance, made her an asset on international committees such as those of UNICEF and IBBY. One wonders how she greeted Maurice Sendak when she sat with him on the very first jury for the Ezra Jack Keats Award!

Canadian concerns came first, of course. Irma McDonough Milnes, noted in Canadian children's literature as the originator and editor of *In Review* and as the once Ontario government consultant on children's literature writes warmly of Irene. She recalls their association on the founding committee of IBBY-Canada when they "slaved" over the constitution and notes that often, Irene's "good humour and devotion saved the day." She also organized the founding conference of IBBY-Canada in Ottawa. In 1989 she received, from IBBY-Canada, the Claude Aubrey Award for her contribution to the field of Canadian children's literature and was named one of its life-long members in 1996. Irene was also on the first board of the Canadian Children's Book Centre and is, as ever, their enthusiastic supporter. As early as 1971 she joined the crusade to establish Communication-Jeunesse, designed to promote French-Canadian literature for children. It is safe to say that there has not been a movement in Canadian children's literature in which her presence has not been felt.

Publications enhance the work of an institution, indeed are necessary to it; even banks put out newsletters! Although Canadian children's books have their place in Canadiana (our national bibliography), such listings do not show quality. Irene was quick to build on the National Library's first venture into publishing a specialized list, namely *Notable Canadian Children's Books/Un choix de livres canadiens pour la jeunesse*,² first published in 1973. These annotated lists eventually developed into the livelier *Read Up On It/Lisez sur le sujet* packed with information for all who work with children and their books. These catalogues and other annotated lists (Irene saw annotated lists as promoting a country's literature and encouraging its distribution) could certainly form the basis for a national bibliography, a project that Irene was considering before her retirement. She was ever planning for new ways, both popular and scholarly, to promote Canadian children's books.

One great reason for Irene's success as an administrator and as a facilitator may well be that she never lost sight of or contact with the people who were the objects of the network established at the National Library — the children. In particular, she did not surrender her gift for or belief in storytelling and took every opportunity to return to a "hands on" performance in various public libraries. Even in her retirement she joined a volunteer classroom program of storytelling

in the Carleton school system. Here she would smile at the children gathered in front of her, put her finger to her lips and whisper: "Sshh ... Magic Time."

She was able to share the magic of story with a wider audience when she collaborated with two friends, Louise McDiarmid and Lorrie Andersen, to prepare two collections of stories (both of which went into second reprints: *Storytellers' Rendezvous* and *Storytellers' Encore*. A third, recent collection of stories, *Share a Tale*, was prepared with Louise McDiarmid. All three books were published by the Canadian Library Association. The stories include Native tales (both Inuit and Indian), folk tales of French Canada and stories brought to Canada by immigrants from various countries. The stories were not only pre-tested with children, but are timed! Here is *la crème de la crème* with the convenience of fast food.

Irene's position at the National Library, her temperament, and her knowledge of, and devotion to, the cause of Canadian children's literature, in whatever language, brought her close to the very pulse of literary creation. Creators of Canadian children's books acknowledge her constant interest and support. Ann Blades, Ron Lightburn, Paule Daveluy, Kit Pearson and Suzanne Martel, are five whom I personally consulted (it could have been fifty-five) and according to their reports, Irene's influence and personal attention has enhanced their careers. I have myself been the recipient of Irene's care and attention. Several years ago, I spent two days in examining the collection she had so carefully built in Ottawa and it appeared as if this important, busy professional woman had nothing to do but look after my interests. It seems apparent that anyone who claimed her attention received it whole-heartedly.

As the classics are still the glue that holds children's literature together around the world, so Irene's position as Chief of the Children's Literature Division of the National Library of Canada (a classic position, as is that of Chief of the Children's Literature Center of the Library of Congress) gave prestige both at home and abroad to the totality of a nation's commitment to the intellectual development of its young. Irene, in turn, brought to the position a quiet power that enhanced it many times over. It is distressing that there is no commitment to find a direct successor to her who will hold a position of the same importance.

The Children's Literature Service of the National Library has been subsumed into the larger Canadian Literature Research Service, although in the Library's 1996 publicity brochure the Children's Literature Service still has a separate listing. Still, there is a difference from the recent past that brings into question the "downsizing" of services to children in Canada's major library. In spite of Shakespeare who asked: "What's in a name?" with the implication that it doesn't matter, there is an unfortunate result when a name is taken away or lessened or eroded. The Toronto Public Library, once world-famous for its services to children, has also downgraded the word "children" as in children's librarian to replace it by the word "generalist" or some similar title. Administrators, of course, vigorously claim that they are giving the same service with less money, fewer staff and less prestige for the service. Ordinary common sense makes such claims laughable. I now suspect that the "downsizing" of children's services began with the reorganization of the Canadian Library Association some years ago when the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians was pushed

under the larger umbrella of the Canadian Association of Public Libraries. Take a name away and you take away an identity. It is now obvious that we in the profession (including myself) who have been concerned with the reading of the young have not fought the good fight. I think that we need CACL back again in its former full and specialized purpose. We state, often loudly and proudly, that the young are our prime national resource, and yet it is services to them that tend to get cut in times of recession. Administrators should remember, however, that services to children include a wide variety of adults who are concerned with them and who also need special assistance in this special area.

However, in all of the turmoil over the erosion of services to the young, it must also be acknowledged that, in general, the public libraries across the country are still holding firm on behalf of our young citizens.

We also have the shining example of the Children's Literature Service of the National Library of Canada who kept paramount the integrity of services for children.

The noted Canadian writer for the young, Paule Daveluy, has expressed especially for this tribute, the warmth and respect that we in this country hold for Irene (Irène) Elizabeth Aubrey.

J'ai de belles image d'Irène
et j'entends sa voix douce et son élocution raffinée.
— Paule! dit-elle, un sourire dans la voix ...
... et tout de suite, elle est là,
l'amie venue de froid,
la porteuse de bonnes nouvelles,
la folle comme moi des enfants et des livres,
une femme douce,
dotée d'une énergie de fer,
une présence rayonnante et néanmoins effacée,
une véritable aristocrate,
un trésor national.

Perhaps after all, Tolstoy was wrong.

Notes

- 1 Elizabeth Cleaver. *La biche miraculeuse: une légende hongroise*. [Adaptation et images d'Elizabeth Cleaver. Traduit de l'anglais par Irene E. Aubrey] Montréal: Les Éditions HRW, 1973. 64 pp.
- 2 [Editor's Note] Notable Canadian Children's Books: Un choix de livres canadiens pour la jeunesse. An annotated catalogue prepared by Sheila Egoff and Alvine Bélisle for an exhibition arranged by the National Library of Canada. National Library of Canada/Bibliothèque nationale du Canada, Ottawa, 1973. X, 96 pp.

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